Prepared to respond, whatever the weather

Across the globe authorities are learning more about the implications of severe weather. **JL Smither** considers events in the United States, and initiatives aimed to improve response

SEVERE WEATHER CAN NOT ONLY cause major disasters, but can also hinder other disaster response activities. Jurisdictions should be aware of threats and prepared to handle the damages. Plans to communicate with citizens when severe weather threatens an area are essential.

Since Hurricane Andrew slammed into Florida's east coast in 1992, the state's emergency managers have worked with telephone companies to publish unchanging emergency information in local telephone directories, which are delivered annually to all residents. The state of Florida encourages citizens to prepare for disasters by making information accessible at all times in every household.

The information is accessible in a non-electronic format and not subject to change, it is considered reliable even when communication systems are not working. Emergency telephone numbers, maps of flood-prone areas and evacuation routes, disaster preparedness tips, shelter-in-place guidelines and lists of local radio and television stations are all available in the telephone book.

■ **For urgent impending weather alerts – such as a tornado or flash flood alert – emergency managers must sometimes contact a large number of people quickly to advise them of possible threats.**

Often, emergency responders are prepared to use television, radio or sirens to warn people. However, these forms of communication do not address many residents who are deaf or hard of hearing. Jurisdictions should establish a system to ensure that every citizen in the area is aware of the alert, despite potential hearing impairments or lack of television access in the community.

Following a particularly devastating outbreak of tornadoes in 1999, researchers with the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration conducted a survey of affected Oklahoma residents and recognised this problem. The state of Oklahoma's Office Emergency Management worked with several state disability agencies and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to create a subscription-only service, called OK-WARN, that provides National Weather Service alerts to users through their pagers, cell phones, email accounts, or personal digital assistants. By registering online for free, Oklahoma residents can choose to receive messages about tornado, severe thunderstorm, flash flood and winter weather alerts, as well as civil emergency messages, including information about terror attacks, wildfires, and chemical spills, and other types of notification.

Owing to the success of this programme, in 2006 the US Department of Homeland Security incorporated the OK-WARN model into its Community Emergency Preparedness Information Network training, which teaches emergency responders to accommodate individuals who are deaf or hard-of-hearing.

■ **After a disaster strikes, first responders should remain aware of severe weather that could hinder response operations.**

In general, incident commanders should remain updated on local weather reports during the entire response operation. The weather could affect how emergency responders plan their response, what equipment they use, and the best place to establish shelters and command posts. Upon an indication of rain or lightning storms, for example, the incident command post should be established in a sheltered area because responders, victims, and emergency equipment would need to be protected from the elements. Responders who are fighting a wildfire or an urban fire need to know about expected wind direction and strength in order to plan their attack. If flooding is a possibility, shelters should be located well away from potential flood-prone areas.

In Connecticut, responders are encouraged to follow special procedures in cold weather. The Connecticut Capitol Region Metropolitan Medical Response System's Taskforce of Decontamination Protocols provides emergency responders with guidelines for mass decontamination after a chemical, biological, or radiological incident.

Normally, wet decontamination would take place outdoors in an area with good drainage and access to running water. In cold weather, though, some contaminated victims may be reluctant to allow responders to decontaminate them on-scene and may leave the decontamination area to find a warmer location, spreading contamination along the way. The Connecticut Taskforce recommends that responders should conduct all decontamination indoors if the outdoor temperature is below 35° Fahrenheit (2°C). Recommended indoor locations include car washes, decontamination trailers, and indoor showers such as at swimming pool facilities.

If the temperature is above 35° Fahrenheit but below 65° Fahrenheit (18°C), responders should proceed with an outdoor decontamination for most victims and move them as quickly as possible to a warm, indoor location, such as an office building or a heated trailer. Certain categories of people, such as the elderly or people with heart conditions, should be decontaminated indoors, even at this temperature.

■ **Being prepared for severe weather can help responders both before and after an incident.**

Tested weather alerts provide the community with essential information protect the population.

After a natural or man-made disaster strikes, remaining aware of weather conditions ensures the safety of both responders and victims. Severe weather can be especially harmful, but by preparing and staying alert, responders can mitigate many of its negative effects. CRJ

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